TIPS FOR TOPS

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All boards referred to in this article were played in the 299er game at Bridge Centre of Niagara on , Feb. 2nd, 2021, (Game #38411). Full results and game schedule at www.bridgecentreofniagara.com.

- Overcalls & Advances
- Defending against No Trump

Bd: 8 Vul: None Dlr: West	♠ Q86 ♥ AJT3 ♦ AT754 ♣ Q	Optimum W 3Cx: +100
♠ 5 ♥ K84 ♦ Q82 ♣ JT9874	N W 8 E S	♠ AKT2 ♥ 9752 ♦ KJ3 ♣ A6
13 6 HCP 15 6	♠ J9743 ♥ Q6 ♦ 96 ♣ K532	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N - - - 2 1 S - - - 2 1 E 1 - - - - W 2 1 1 - -

Board 8 is worth a look from a couple of angles. Let's start with the bidding. E was probably getting ready to open 1NT, but N opened 1D ahead of her. There may seem to be 2 choices now for E, but they aren't close, in my opinion. Yes, you have both majors, so some Es doubled, probably hoping to find a major suit fit. But you won't be happy if your partner bids Cs, will you? On the other hand, if you bid the 1NT you were planning, it describes this hand perfectly. You certainly are not afraid of a D lead. And if your partner has some points and a major they can still use Stayman to find the fit.

The 1NT overcall has the bonus effect of preventing a 1S bid from S. More on that later. If S passes, W should pass as well.

How should the defence go against 1NT? S has 2 possible leads. Let's start with partner's suit, Ds. S will lead the 9 - top of a doubleton - and N now knows almost all there is to know about that suit. S is clearly not leading a 3rd or 4th best card, so the 9 is either singleton or top of doubleton. Either way, E has the K and J and 1 or 2 more. With the Q on the board, she is always entitled to at least 2 D tricks. There is no rush to take the A. Wait until it can capture an honour.

E takes the trick with her K and starts on Cs. The Q falls on the first trick and the K takes the second. Now what should N be thinking?

Declarer has 4 C tricks ready to cash in the dummy **IF** she can get to them. She can if she has another C, but if not, N's 2 Aces can stop her ever reaching dummy. That's the key point here; N must now not play either A except when it will capture the DQ or the HK.

N can "see" 34-37 HCP; her own 13, 6 in dummy and 15-18 in E. S has now shown up with 3; she doesn't have more than 3 more, so she's not going to be much more help on defence. But if E has no more Cs, she will always be playing out of her hand - which is to defenders' advantage. N should be ready to play a patient safe defence and wait for the tricks to come to her.

Do we know whether E has any more Cs? Let's hope we can trust partner. In a situation like this, S should not take her K unless either she has no choice OR she knows declarer has no more. In this case, it's the latter; S could see 10 Cs as soon as dummy appeared, so the situation was clear as soon as N played the Q. But, from N's perspective, S started with either 2Cs or 4 - and she hopes it was 4.

What should S lead when she's in with the C? Anything but another C! For those who use defensive signals, N will have played an encouraging 7 on the first trick (not the 10; you can't afford that!) and S will know it's safe to lead another D. Otherwise, a S seems reasonable, N must have at least a few of those.

Either way; when the time comes for N to take one of her As, she will need to be careful not to set up a dummy entry in the other red suit, which probably means leading back a S.

One more comment on the bidding: what if S bids 2S over 1NT? It would be pretty bold with such a weak suit, but I mention it to point out that a bid in this situation is NOT a strong bid. With a good hand you should double and expect to have a good chance of defeating 1NT. This is an exception to the general rule that a new suit by responder is forcing. Here it is not only not forcing, but opener would need a pretty special hand to act again. Game is very unlikely with a NT overcall on your left; a part-score or a small minus is usually the best you can hope for. N should not punish her partner for being aggressive by raising the level for no reason.

Last week I started to address the subject of overcalls. This is an area

that deserves more attention, because responding to an overcall is not the same as responding to an opening bid.

First the terminology. Bridge writers tend to refer to the partner of the overcaller as the “advancer” so as not to confuse them with the “responder”, who is the partner of the opening bidder. So that’s the protocol I will use.

When your partner opens the bidding on the 1-level, they are showing a hand strength of about 13-21HCP. Opener’s partner is encouraged to find a response with 6 or more points, because that might be all that’s needed to play at game level. An overcall at the 1-level, on the other hand, reflects a lower range; more like 8-18. If advancer has just a few points, game is unlikely. But, now that the auction is competitive, there are other considerations - such as getting in the way of the opponents, interfering with their ability to find their best contract. For this reason, your first priority when partner overcalls should be to show support if you have it.

Remembering that overcalls - even of minor suits - should show 5 cards, all you need to support partner is 3 cards in her suit. With 6 points and 3-card or more support, you should raise your partner’s overcall. Next week I will cover how to raise with both weak and strong hands - it’s not the same as raising an opening bid.

If you don’t have support for partner, can/should you introduce your own suit? Maybe, but you should be conscious of a few conditions. And on the first, I have to hedge a little. Unless you have agreed* otherwise with your partner, a new suit by advancer is not considered forcing. If partner made a weak overcall in her suit and doesn’t have a fit with yours, she can - and should - pass. If you also have a weak hand and a weak suit, you can expect to be doubled.

**This is something you should discuss with your partner, because some pairs like to play it forcing.*

In either case, don’t bid a new suit just because you don’t like your partner’s. Only bid a new suit if there’s a good chance it will lead to a better contract than partner’s bid. If you have a strong hand (opening points, eg) you have a little more room to experiment, but you had better know where you are going to retreat to if partner doesn’t like your suit. An opening hand opposite a minimum overcall won’t likely produce a game, and you can easily get too high with a misfit.

So what should your hand and suit look like? It should meet the standards of an overcall - a good 5-card suit or a 6-card suit with at least 6HCP at the 1 level or at least 11 at the 2 level. Remember; you might end up playing in your suit, but you are also suggesting a lead if you end up defending. An anaemic J-high suit is not suitable for either purpose. And a 4-card suit doesn’t cut it here; if partner wanted to ask about your 4-card suits, she should have made a take-out double instead of overcalling.

Another possibility if you don’t have support is to bid NT. The strength required here is a little more than if partner had opened; about 8-11 for 1NT and 12-14 for 2NT. But don’t do this just because you don’t like partner’s suit; in fact, you really need to have 2 of her suit, or you may find yourself cut off from winners in her hand. And, of course, you must have control of the opponents’ suit(s).

I will write more about overcalls and advances next week.